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### Journeys and pilgrimages: Marion Halligan's fictions

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## Journeys and Pilgrimages: Marion Halligan's Fiction

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JOURNEYS PROVIDE THE PRINCIPAL NARRATIVE STRUCTURE for literary works as diverse as the *Odyssey*, *Gulliver's Travels* and brief lyrics like Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," whilst also symbolizing aspiration, a quest for truth, or an individual's progress from cradle to grave. Some literary journeys take the form of pilgrimages, with characters seeking enlightenment or redemption, as in John Bunyan's great allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Journeys also feature largely in much colonial and postcolonial writing. Early colonists usually traveled great distances from their country of origin to what some hoped might prove a Promised Land, though, for many, their birth country remained a lost Eden where they longed to return. Generations later their descendants, while no longer identifying with the mother country, have often felt impelled to visit it, if not as a pilgrimage to the "center," then as a rite of passage; and for antipodeans, "the tyranny of distance" has frequently provided further impetus for overseas travel.

Novelist Marion Halligan describes "the complicated knot of feelings" she has for England,<sup>1</sup> acknowledging that, like all writers in colonized countries, she is heir to two literary and cultural traditions—her local one and that of the colonizing nation.

I was educated into quite a complex mixture of intense pride in our Australianism plus an equally intense belief in our English heritage [. . .] I'm an Australian, but I own English literature by right of education and knowledge and familiarity and above all being formed by it.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, along with the many English literary allusions in her work, there are quite a number to French literature, and Halligan's Australian characters frequently interact with France and French people. Married to an academic who taught French at the Australian National University, Halligan accompanied him to France on periods of overseas study leave. Housekeeping and sending children to school there meant she became more fully immersed in French life than had she visited merely as a tourist. She writes: "I have lived altogether for a number of years in Paris [. . .] I think living without a lot of money in a place means you have to live like the locals, you learn to understand what is important and what isn't" (*Taste of Memory* 24–5). Not surprisingly, journeys between France and Australia, some resembling pilgrimages, figure impor-

tantly in her work. One book, a travel memoir, *Cockles of the Heart* (1996), recounts an attempted pilgrimage, made with her husband, through southern France en route to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. (They ran out of time and had to return to Australia before reaching their goal.) The pilgrimage theme is also present in Halligan's novels *Spidercup* (1990), *The Golden Dress* (1998), and *Valley of Grace* (2009). A betrayed Australian wife in *Spidercup* responds to her situation by escaping to France. In *The Golden Dress* an Australian artist, at work in a Paris studio, tries to make sense of his life as the narrative moves between past and present. *Valley of Grace* is set entirely in France, with only a few very peripheral Australian references, and, unlike Halligan's other novels, all the characters are French, though they travel within France and beyond.

In *Spidercup*, discovering her husband's liaison with a younger woman shatters Elinor Spencer's comfortable Canberra life. Enraged, she abandons home and family, fleeing to France where her friends Christophe and his wife Marie-Claude loan her a house in the southern village of Sévérac. Driving there at night she sees the ruins of its medieval chateau floodlit on the hill, resembling the New Jerusalem of her father's favorite song:

I saw the holy city  
Beside the tideless sea  
The light of God was on its streets  
The gates were opened wide  
And all the world might enter  
And no one was denied. (21)

Initially, however, Sévérac and its paradisaical surroundings seem merely to mirror Elinor's own anger and vengefulness. While the summer landscape appears Edenic, vipers proliferate, so antivenin must be kept in the fridge. The story of a local seventeenth-century Duke who once lived in the chateau becomes an obsession, reflecting the emotional violence of Elinor's own broken marriage. Believing his wife Gloriande unfaithful, the Duke, under pretense of sending her on pilgrimage, had her conveyed to a nearby forest where his doctor opened her veins so she slowly bled to death. He himself was directed to make a pilgrimage to Loretto as penance and built a great church on his return, which itself became a site of pilgrimage later destroyed in the Revolution.

Elinor, while convinced of Gloriande's innocence, simultaneously identifies her with Samantha, her husband's mistress, whose veins she imagines slitting till she "lies bleeding to death in the forests of the mind" (33) and is most disconcerted by Christophe's later insistence that historical evidence indicates Gloriande was actually guilty. Elinor, herself now involved in a brief, adulterous liaison with Christophe, must recognize that innocence and guilt are less easily distinguishable than she previously imagined. She is finally prodded into resolving her own dilemmas through seeing a total stranger killed before her eyes in a motor accident. The dead woman's car has been precipitated into a field, its radio still playing Vivaldi's *Autumn* concerto, with the sound of hunting horns a reminder of death's presence, even in Arcady. This shock, together with a contrite letter from her husband renouncing his affair and asking forgiveness, eventually prompts her return to Canberra. The visit to Sévérac has been, not exactly a pilgrimage, but an entry into greater self-awareness as she ponders a sentence from Sartre to which Christophe has directed her: "Life is nothing until it is lived, but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose" (153).

Like *Spidercup*, *The Golden Dress* transports its characters between France and Australia, though with greater emphasis on the latter country. The narrative circles back on itself, moving from place to place over several decades, with sophisticated city existence in Paris and Sydney balanced against rural and provincial working-class life in Australia. Ray Pellerin, an Australian painter, is left feeling isolated and depressed in his Paris studio when his girlfriend Martine leaves to resume her job as a graphic designer in Sydney, expecting him to rejoin her there in a few months. Becoming increasingly preoccupied with death, Ray focuses his attention on a box picked up in a Paris flea market, where its sharkskin covering is described as *peau de chagrin*, which he translates as "skin of disappointment." Nothing flourishes: his paintings die on him and the studio itself appears dusty and death-ridden as he becomes increasingly obsessed with a clochard, or street person—an enigmatic figure who haunts the area around his building. Martine speculates that, rather like an artist, the clochard is a watcher who brings what he sees into being: "He watches and the world is. We are. He makes us exist" (11). After her departure, Ray invites the clochard to his studio, preparing sumptuous meals for him which he then draws in great detail, and the book's opening section ends with him slipping out into the street one evening while the clochard lies asleep on his bed.

The novel then provides an extended flashback to Ray's working-class childhood, living with his mother, Molly, and grandmother, Ivy, in his home town of Newcastle, as he contemplates the shadow cast by his mother's early death and the loss of his best friend Stephen in a shark attack at a surf carnival. The golden dress of the title is contrived by Molly, with Ivy's help, from a remnant of material to wear to a dance held at her workplace: "It was the dark, golden yellow color of honey, a heavy linen fabric with crusty embroidery in some sort of silky thread which the light caught and made to gleam like gold" (131). It impresses everyone who sees it, including

Ray, transforming Molly into a shining, hieratic figure he later incorporates into many of his paintings. The dress itself is a work of art created from a piece of cloth, or "rag" as Ivy calls it, but while it represents the triumph of art, it is also linked to the *chagrin* box with its skin of disappointment. Molly, who has successfully passed herself off as a widow, falls in love with a married man, becoming pregnant to him. Her appearance at the dance wearing her golden dress is a triumph, but events conspire to suggest her lover has deceived her and, dreading disgrace and social ostracism if she bears a second fatherless child, she drowns shortly after while swimming in the ocean. For Ray, the childhood loss of his mother is later compounded by the death of his best friend when both are teenagers.

Martine, increasingly concerned at not hearing from Ray, and discovering he has apparently disappeared from the Paris studio, determines to go and find him, though at some risk to herself. Taking unpaid leave in cost-cutting times means her job is no longer secure, yet her independence and most of life's comforts depend on it: "a job, any job, let alone one that you love, a career, full of possibilities, for a woman on her own, well into her thirties, in these difficult times you . . . you can't begin to value a job" (313). Forced, however, to choose between her work and Ray, she books a trip to Paris. After much fruitless searching, Martine decides to ask the clochard whether he has seen Ray and struggles to catch him up as he strides through the streets. Eventually she comes close enough to recognize that the clochard actually is Ray. Their encounter, both comic and grotesque, occurs in a dead-end alley, barred from traffic by bollards and filthy with dog turds because street-cleaning machines have no access to it. Ray, hearing her call out, slips and falls, cutting his forehead, while Martine, running across the road, is knocked flying by a car and lands heavily on top of him, breaking two of his ribs. As they lie there injured, this is perhaps, for both of them, the place where all the ladders start, "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

Ray has sought total freedom from desire by living as a clochard. Halligan generally represents artists under two aspects, the observer who stands back from life to see it more clearly and the craftsman immersed in the material process of making art. Both activities are essential, but Ray has retreated wholly into the role of observer, abandoning direct involvement in life until Martine draws him back into the world of love and desire. Ray's surname, Pellerin, echoes two French words, *pèlerin*, meaning traveler, pilgrim, or even dissembler, and *pèlerine*, meaning a cloak. In its meaning of pilgrim, it applies to Ray's progress through life and his wanderings in Paris. Although everyone's life pilgrimage leads inexorably to death, Ray's movement through city streets traces a futile labyrinth leading to a dead end until Martine rescues him. Only then can he resume his true pilgrimage, which involves returning to the land of his birth and his primary source of inspiration. Ray dissembles by assuming the role of clochard, and also as a painter, by presenting life wrapped in the golden cloak, or *pèlerine* of art. Although Martine has rescued Ray, they both remain vulnerable to life's hazards. Molly's golden dress has a counterpart in the coat Martine discards in the

filthy alleyway because it is now befouled with dog shit. This elegant garment of dark blue cashmere lined with red silk represents the life she has been forced to abandon in rescuing Ray, for, on returning to Sydney, she finds her job has been retrenched. Following her heart, marrying Ray and bearing children involves sacrifice, though not on the same desperate scale as Molly. In her memoir *The Taste of Memory*, Halligan points out that desire is both necessary and painful.

All art is about desire, the artist's desire to take something and make something of it, which finally and always remains desire, is never fulfilled, not absolutely. As is the experience of the receiver, the audience the reader. It's because we are human, and live in an imperfect sublunary world. (52)

Art itself is both the golden dress and the *chagrin* box since it makes us long for something it doesn't quite provide, offering disappointment together with delight.

Both Elinor in *Spidercup* and Ray in *The Golden Dress* acquire a measure of self-knowledge and insight from their journeys between Australia and France following a cyclical process indicated by seasonal change and the passage of time. As the French summer yields to autumn, Elinor yearns for home, even though it will be a different season in Canberra: "She had a desire to be home and smelling the autumn and the new year's work, and then remembered that now was August, the season of spring coming, spring all sickly pink and white and violent dusty winds" (139). She will, however, pick up the broken threads of family relationships to enter a new phase of her life. In *The Golden Dress*, Ray and Martine, now back in Australia and married, enter a different cycle with a baby daughter named after her grandmother. Representing a new generation, this child will continue the flow of life disrupted by Molly's death. Writer and reader engage in journeys of their own as they accompany these fictional characters on their travels.

Halligan's description in *Cockles of the Heart* of the workings of memory and the process of life writing also applies to the way many of her novels are structured.

You can see your life as a straight line from birth to death, a kind of time line, with notches marking significant events, a firmly ruled line. Or you can see it as a series of loops, turning back on itself, linear still, but forming circles, or ellipses, possibly moving forward as it loops backwards, or perhaps sideways, but not marching ever onward like a Christian soldier. Maybe it's a spiral, the loops higher or lower, upwards or downwards, differently angled. I prefer this view to the ruled straight line. (*Cockles*, 227)

In *Valley of Grace* the narrative also proceeds circuitously, leading us through the lives of several Parisian couples and the intricate networks connecting them. There are no immense journeys like those between France and Australia, but the pilgrimage motif is important. Two characters visit Lourdes and two others live in the Rue St. Jacques, once a starting point for medieval pilgrims traveling from Paris to Compostela in Spain. Their apartment also overlooks a former hospital for

pilgrims, now the Institute for Deaf Children (67). The novel's emphasis, however, is on life itself as a pilgrimage from birth to death. Although, as in much of Halligan's fiction, some characters die before their time, the focus here is principally on birth, with three babies born and at least two others conceived in the course of the narrative. But birth, even that of a yearned-for child, is subject to the blind workings of fate: "Fate to be childless. Fate to have a child. Fate to die in childbirth. Fate to bear a monster in body or in mind, capable of all sorts of atrocities. A sickly baby, or a healthy one. The delight of its parents or the breaking of their hearts" (33). The Institute for Deaf Children and the intensive-care ward dealing with children's cardiac surgery—where two of the novel's characters work—are both reminders of the afflictions fate can visit on babies and young children.

Ghislaine, a much loved and wanted little girl, born to another character, Séverine, suffers a form of autism so severe she must be institutionalized. Séverine's close friend Fanny, on the other hand, has great difficulty conceiving despite her happy, fulfilling marriage to Gérard, a builder who buys and restores old houses, and her intense longing for a child is an important thread winding through the novel. Reminders of babies are all around. Her eighteenth century apartment, its ceiling decorated with cupids—"fat winged baby creatures" (13)—is located above an elegant baby-wear shop, *Plaisir d'Enfant*. Val de Grace, a nearby church Fanny sometimes visits, is also decorated with cherubs resembling fat babies and was built by Anne of Austria, queen to Louis XIII, who had promised it to God if He granted her a child after twenty-three years of childless marriage. Her prayers were answered by the birth of a son, the future Louis XIV, though the novel later suggests that the Queen's pregnancy was due not to divine intervention but to the services of Cardinal Mazarin, the king's principal minister. (220)

In *Valley of Grace*, the motif of babies and young children is part of a complex exploration of fidelity and betrayal between parent and child, between lovers and between married couples, even between citizens and their country. Infidelity characterizes the marriage of Jean-Marie Demagny, eminent Catholic philosopher and academic, and his wife Sabine who runs his household according to a careful routine that preserves the order, elegance, and comfort her husband insists is essential for writing his lectures, articles and books: "It was Sabine's job to see that the house ran, not like clockwork, which ticks, or like a machine, which hums or purrs or even roars, rather like an animal organism whose gentle breathing you might hear as a comforting rhythm if you listened quietly, but which was silent, as thinking is, and digestion, when it is healthy" (39). One of her duties involves accommodating young women students her husband selects to spend occasional nights with him, summoning them from a garden pavilion and leading them to his bedroom. Should one of the girls fall pregnant, Sabine, who is forbidden children of her own—"Jean-Marie made it clear that he was to be her only concern in this marriage" (36)—organizes an abortion. When one girl, Mimi, informs Sabine she is pregnant but rejects any idea of a termination,

the older woman feels drawn to her, providing financial support and eventually acting as surrogate godmother to her baby, Louise. Although continuing to run Jean-Marie's household, Sabine now looks after the child while Mimi is at work, transforming the garden pavilion into a temporary day-care center and, in a further spirit of revolt, delights in the resulting disruption to her husband's cherished routines: "Sometimes you can't control babies. Her eyes gleamed. That's the point, isn't it. A lot of things you can't control" (177).

There is, however, a darker aspect to this careless engendering of children. When Gérard buys an old house he plans to restore as a home for Fanny and himself, he is appalled to discover a young child tied to a bed in the attic and casually tended by an elderly neighbor in return for inheriting the house. Its recently dead owners had hidden their illegitimate grandchild's existence for ten years, keeping her alive but with no emotional involvement or interaction; so the girl, simultaneously imprisoned and abandoned, never develops language or even the most basic social skills. Naming her Charlotte, Gérard takes her home where he and Fanny try to care for her, but once her existence is leaked to the press, a range of experts want to study this *enfant sauvage*, or wild child, including Jean-Marie Demagny who publishes a learned article on "That drowned origin the mystery of the human" (96). As work proceeds on the house, the skeleton of Charlotte's mother, who apparently died giving birth, is unearthed and her identity revealed as one of Jean-Marie's students: "She was one of the cleverest girls I ever taught" (101). Although he denies any possibility of parenthood, Demagny is deeply distressed by the discovery. There is no indication in the novel of whether Sabine realizes his connection with Charlotte, but her care for Mimi's baby, Louise, appears both an acknowledgement of her own complicity and an attempt at restitution: "I owe it to Louise, she said, so softly she seemed to be talking to herself. All the others . . . I failed . . . all the others. Well, Louise is here" (239).

Charlotte, aged ten and with no previous exposure to language, is now too old to understand or acquire it, preventing her development as a full human being, although, ironically, she is named after a great poet through the location of her grandparents' house in the Rue Charles Baudelaire. Fanny, convinced that love will restore the child's humanity, cares for her devotedly, becoming seriously ill from the strain and, while she is in hospital, the authorities send Charlotte to different foster homes, but she dies shortly after. According to one doctor: "I think finally, she died of not being able to live" (240). Unlike children in the cardiac unit's intensive care ward or the Institute for Deaf Children, Charlotte was born without defect or disability: "You know . . . she was born so healthy. Exceptionally healthy. She couldn't have survived that abuse if she hadn't had a strong and perfect little body. And they destroyed her" (241). On the day Gérard discovers Charlotte's existence, Fanny brings home a nineteenth-century engraving of a medieval pilgrim. It is captioned, "Give me my scallop shell of quiet," from Walter Raleigh's poem "The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage," supposedly written in

prison while its author was facing execution and describing a pilgrimage from this life to the next:

Blood must be my bodies balmer,  
No other balme will there be given  
Whilst my soule like a white Palmer  
Trauels to the land of heauen. (Raleigh 50)

Betrayed by those who should have nurtured her, Charlotte also has her life journey cruelly truncated.

Themes of death and pilgrimage combine still more closely when Fanny's employer, Luc, owner of the antiquarian bookshop where she works, accompanies his dying mother, Delphine, to Lourdes, though he himself is a non-believer: "My mother wants it. It fills me with horror, but I'll go" (139). Ambivalence and irony abound. Lourdes appears utterly kitsch with "Myriad excrescent souvenir shops that blotch the town" (141), yet seems to offer spiritual consolation: "it is the pilgrimage that matters" (141). For Delphine the trip becomes an experience of grace: "That's the true pilgrimage. For the soul's well-being" (142). Halligan here draws together themes of pilgrimage, children, death, and infidelity. The town's origin as a holy site derives from a child's vision when, in 1858, the fourteen-year-old Bernadette Soubirous announced that the Virgin Mary had appeared to her. A pamphlet Luc picks up quotes from Jean-Marie Demagny's book on the Lourdes experience, extolling its spiritual benefits: "And as so often in this Faith of ours, the way is shown by a child" (147)—a bitter irony considering the Demagny marriage and Charlotte's suffering. Luc recognizes his mother hopes that the pilgrimage might transform him. Although she knows he is gay, "she wanted him normal and married. With children. It is terrible to grow old without children, she says to him. Life without children—it is not to be thought of" (145). While Luc is comfortable with his own sexuality, he is also confronting new-found knowledge that his partner, Julien, has different views on fidelity, believing his casual encounters with other men in no way diminish the love between himself and Luc, a situation the latter has difficulty coming to terms with.

As Luc and his mother travel to Lourdes, so Fanny accompanies her mother, Cathérine, on a different kind of pilgrimage, a journey into the past as they visit the southern French village where Cathérine spent her childhood. Once again, motifs of death and pilgrimage combine with that of childhood. Recollections of the Nazi occupation during World War II are a haunting memory. One village, Oradur, was totally erased from the map. Men were herded into barns and women into the church, with the Germans shooting them in the legs so they were unable to escape once the buildings were set on fire: "A baby they found they baked in the bakery oven" (171). Cathérine seeks out the commemorative plaque to her father, Fleuret, who fought in the Resistance and was executed after being betrayed by a collaborator. She and Fanny discuss why some people never abandoned hope the Germans would be defeated while others collaborated, believing Marshal Pétain's Vichy regime promised order and stability. Cathérine reflects: "If I'd been grown up then, would I have

been a member of the Resistance? I like to think I would have been. But I don't know; I think if I'd had children I would have done whatever I thought was necessary to keep them alive. Maybe that would have been collaborating" (185). Returning to Paris, Cathérine, who always assumed herself to be an only child, feels quite betrayed when a complete stranger, Monique Anderson, arrives from England to inform her they are half sisters. Monique's English mother fought alongside Fleuret in the French Resistance and they became lovers, with Monique born posthumously and raised in England.

Cathérine stared at this stranger. You are telling me that my father betrayed my mother, she said.

Betrayed, said Monique. I do not think the word is betrayed. Betrayed was what his countrymen did to him. It is difficult to live the life of a hero. It is necessary to take what comfort you can. My mother loved him.

Did my mother know?

I don't think so. How could she have? Our father could not have told her. (197)

Children result from acts of love, infidelity, or betrayal, and although Fate determines whether they are born into sickness or health, peace or war, human imagination has often attributed their arrival to divine intervention, an idea the novel plays with half-humorously, as in its account of Louis XIV's conception. When Sabine hears one of Jean-Marie's girls say in "a holy voice" that sex with him was like "being possessed by the god" (45), she wonders whether mythic figures like Mary, Danae, Europa, or Leda enjoyed their divine encounters: "Not much foreplay in a shower of gold, or even a swan for that matter. And as for the Holy Spirit, the girl didn't even know until told about it later. It needed an angel with lilies to inform her" (45). One conception in the novel, though in no way miraculous, appears to answer Delphine's prayers that Luc might father children. He and Julien are approached by friends, a lesbian couple seeking a sperm donor. Agnès is a GP and Claude a specialist in the children's cardiac unit, where Julien works as a nurse. The two men agree to fatherhood, mingling their sperm, and Agnès eventually bears a healthy little girl, though her pregnancy is haunted by awareness of the suffering babies and young children in the cardiac unit. Even Fanny succeeds at last in conceiving a child with yet another hint of divine intervention. Visiting a museum on holiday in Turkey with Gérard, she contemplates a many-breasted statue of Artemis in a museum and covertly reaches out to touch one of her egg-like stone breasts. Although when her pregnancy is later confirmed—"She didn't believe Artemis had anything to do with it" (247)—she cherishes a postcard of the statue she has brought back from Greece.

Fanny's pregnancy, revealed at the book's conclusion, is described as a happy beginning—"Who knows about happy endings?" (247)—with the promise of yet another happy beginning when she bears a healthy child. Nevertheless, previous events in the novel indicating the hazards associated with the birth of children, still cast faint shadows. The Artemis statue is more an image of Fate—"capable of bringing down

the creatures she brings forth" (245)—than a benevolent deity, and "Her will is implacable" (246). The book's title, however, is chosen with care, referring not just to a Paris church but expressing a joyful and positive response to life characteristic of so much of Halligan's fiction. Despite the misfortune and cruelty human beings suffer and inflict on one another, and though everyone must eventually walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the author represents human life as a valley of grace abounding in beauty, love, and pleasure. Sensuous delight inheres in her many descriptions of the material world. Objects, like Ivy's rose quilt in *The Golden Dress*, interiors, like Luc's bookshop in *Valley of Grace*, and even food, like the many varieties of olive displayed in a Paris market in *Spidercup*, are lovingly and sumptuously portrayed. This emphasis on materiality and domestic pleasures, together with her predominantly optimistic response to human life, has led some readers and critics to dismiss Halligan's work as lacking gravitas, but careful reading of her fiction indicates a deep consciousness of the anguish and despair so many people endure throughout life. At the same time, she emphasizes the joy Life's pilgrimage yields along with its suffering. □

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*, ed. Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford, Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1993, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> The quotation is from a talk, "Subject Matters," Halligan presented at the Conference on Commonwealth Woman's Writing, September 1991, in Bergen, Norway, and quoted by Ulla Rahbek in "Tales of Love, Lust, Jealousy and Revenge: Intertextuality in Marion Halligan's *Spidercup*," *English Studies*, 1996, 4, p.367.

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